

# "TO GET ITS MESSAGE RIGHT"

What came together to spark this Thinksheet was (1) my thinking about the retreat exercise of having the retreatants write their obituaries--an exercise I've found to get in deep fast!-- & (2) my noticing, in print, the last five words of this Dec. 4 letter to the editor.

1 When you honor one literature with acute attention, with all the hermeneutic skills you've got, you open yourself, logically, to the possibility that you will encounter other literature worthy of making the same demand on you, & to the assurance that, should you feel it your duty so to address the newly encountered literature, you will do so with increased acumen & desire "to get its message right." A negative benefit of the whole business of "understandest thou what thou readest?" (Ac. 8.30 KJV) is that you are disturbed when somebody gets the message wrong--as I was by the editorial to which this letter is a clarification.

(A half-century ago today in a doctoral seminar, Dr. W. Hersey Davis asked me to "define temptation & sin in Matthew." My answer had to be in terms of Mt.'s Greek: the English text was not permitted [& it was considered a shame to go into the pulpit with a Bible not in the original languages; & a shame to fail to read the Greek NT daily as long as you live--which another member of the class, Clarence Jordan of later Koinonia Farms & the Cotton-Patch NT, did, & I've done these 55 years]. To get the message right was a matter of life & death, & of honor or dishonor to the God of Truth. No wonder, as I think of it, it's the motif of so many Thinksheets!)

2 My auto-obituary must include the fact that I'm a compulsive God-referencer: when God's left out of spoken or written discourse, I set myself to defeat the situation's verbal atheism. I remember that getting the message right was only my secondary motive in writing this letter: my primary motive was to point to God, &--judging by the editor's heading--I succeeded.

3 The editorial I'm attacking is an exemplum of the skill of avoiding God-referencing. Note that the editor preferred magic, or at best (taken as the Stoic autonomous sanction) an indirect faith in the fairness of how things are--either paradigm flat, barren, & impersonal in comparison with biblical theism. Another exemplum: In his 1990 PBS 1½-hour "Amazing Grace," Bill Moyers managed to get all the way through without God-or-Jesus-referencing! He used, instead, "grace" as a quasi-magical, natural holophrase. Nothing he said could possibly offend an atheist secularist--quite an achievement for a Southern Baptist clergyman! Not that he gave no offense: he offended biblical theists, especially those of us trained to give acute attention to what we read/hear.

4 Am I recommending that you, in God-referencing, make a bore & pest of yourself? Of course not. But gentle reminders--like my letter's "Christmas is about God's gift of Jesus"--press gently toward gentle persuasion.

5 To say what others only feel makes you a poet. To say what others only think makes you a philosopher. To say what others only dare to feel & think makes you a reformer, maybe even a martyr (Greek, "witness"--unto death). And to correct what another has written or said--to do so so the message is got right--may make you a persona non grata, but it's worth it.

## Gift-giving service to God

In your Nov. 27 editorial, "A gift suggestion," I was startled to see an egregious misinterpretation of a classic.

Congregational minister Lloyd Douglas expanded a sermon into the novel, "The Magnificent Obsession," not to preach what you say it preaches, namely, the deferred gratification "that gifts ... we really give, not just those we exchange with others -- insist on coming back into our lives in one way or another." Indeed, that loop of calculation could not be farther from Douglas' point, which was this: Give anonymously, trusting the results to God (not to some quasi-magical process that will convert your gift into a gift-exchange).

The text of Douglas' sermon was the Gospel of Matthew 6:1-4, a Sermon on the Mount section in which Jesus teaches that our motive should be a simple-hearted serving of God as we give (Early English versions, depending on inadequate textual tradition, unfortunately added to the section the word "openly").

Since Christmas is about God's gift of Jesus, it's appropriate to make the Jesus connection with the Douglas novel, and to get its message right.

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